

THE WORTH OF RESEARCH

The *Vietnam Veteran* returning home found a bewildering set of circumstances confronting them. The government *Department of Veterans Affairs* – *DVA* -, set up to assist the returning veterans of *World War I*, and overseeing the plight of veterans from that time with legislated Acts of parliament to apply a duty of care toward veterans, appeared ever determined to thwart *Vietnam Veterans* of their rightful benefits.

Society shunned them, and in a peculiar turn-around, even the *Returned Services League of Australia* – *RSL* -, an association borne out of the need to look after veterans special needs, turned a blind eye when that call came from *Vietnam Veterans*. Many *conscripts* returning to their old jobs were told it was no longer available, in direct contradiction of the *National Service Act*, with companies ignoring their pleas and advising the Act no longer applied because it had been repealed.

There are many articles and publications that uncover the worst of treatment that befell the *Vietnam Veteran*, and why he found it necessary to band together in its own *association* in an effort to resolve the issues.

The Vietnam veteran movement was not *only* campaigning on the issue of Agent Orange. Having set up its own counselling service at its Parramatta office with qualified volunteer counsellors, it lobbied hard for the government to establish shop-front counselling centres. This was the genesis of the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service (VVCS). It flourished and grew and was renamed the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service. Then in 2019 it evolved again into “Open Arms” – ‘Veterans & Family Counselling’. From its inception we have had to fight off Departmental attempts to completely consume this supposedly independent service. Its independence is essential.

Following a damning study of suicide rates among veterans’ children, it was found that the children of Vietnam Veterans were suiciding at 3 times the general population rate, urgent meetings took place that saw the all Ex-service Organisations (ESOs), lobby for and gaining the set up of a program called ‘*Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training*’, (ASIST) through Lifeline training workshops.

This evolved into ASIST programs at both Operation Life, and Lifelines ‘Livingworks Education’ Program.. Ideally set up in Australia to cater for training with and including veterans, veterans carers, partners and children of veterans groups, both programs were ignored during two recent studies and recommendations into the mounting suicide among those still serving in the ADF, and their families. The millions spent since the adoption of the (1983) Canadian solution, (ASIST) remains in a finite limbo, with answers already looking at government in the face.

And, what of the Agent Orange debacle...

With a concerted lobbying of all government and opposition MPs the VVAA successfully mounted a campaign to force a Royal Commission into the use of herbicides used, and the relevance of effects on troops serving, in South Vietnam. The most toxic, (known at the time), the so-called ‘*Agent Orange*’.

The Royal Commission vindicated our research findings, and found that DVA staffers continually abused veterans rights by denying claims using the harder ‘reasonable doubt’ contest instead of the more beneficial ‘reasonable hypothesis’ it was legally obliged to use for veterans claims.

We continued to appeal cases through the Veterans Review Board, (VRB), and at the higher Administrative Arbitration Tribunal, (AAT), winning case after case, and proving DVAs misuse of the Veterans Entitlement Act (VEA), every time.

Worst was to come with the release of the governments long awaited ‘Official War History’s account of the Agent Orange controversy’, and its complete failure to report on the findings of the royal commission. Even accusing those seeking the truth to be greedy and dishonest.

Naturally, we sought immediate retribution, and after a short campaign won approval for a new study into the effects of herbicides and insecticides used in Vietnam on the servicemen and women who fought in the war. The long awaited historical record, scheduled for release in early 2020, is expected to once again vindicate the Vietnam Veterans, and hopefully bring a finality to 40 years of campaigning for justice.

And, now.....

More recently our research has coincided with the Productivity Commissions probe into the workings of the DVA. As well as, an in-depth response to its findings and recommendations, and with a consortium of other ESOs, included our own recommendations as to some resolutions to several articles where DVA may improve its services for those Australians its government sends to its wars.

The evolution of training for advocates and the raising of a round table consortium of DVA delegates and ESO representative in recent years, has brought with it confidence that time will invoke change. Meanwhile the VVFA continue to battle on behalf of veterans, and winning case after case at the AAT and VRB for our clients.